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ABSTRACT

Many schools across the United States have created a new grade between kindergarten and first grade, called transition classes, to deal with low-achieving kindergarten and first-grade students. Upon completion of the transition class, students return to a regular class, where they usually remain a year behind their age cohorts. This paper presents findings of a case study that examined how three New England school districts used transition programs to manage a problem of readiness and failure in the early primary grades. Data were derived from: (1) a total of 53 interviews with administrators, support staff, teachers (kindergarten, pre-first grade, first grade, and second grade), and two groups of parents (those who enrolled their children in transition programs and those who refused); (2) observations of transition, kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade classes; and (3) document analysis. Findings indicate that although the pre-one programs studied provide a developmentally appropriate learning environment, they perpetuate the continuation of a curriculum built on homogeneity and a lockstep system of grades and constitute a mild form of tracking that equals an extra year in school. Recommendations are made to design the curriculum around Kliebard's metaphors of growth and travel; shift the burden of readiness from children to the schools; center the structure of elementary schools around parents and the community; empower teachers; utilize the inclusion model; and abolish the lockstep system of grades. Two tables are included. (LMI)

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Transition Classes: Alternative Learning Environments that Perpetuate Inappropriate Curriculum in Surrounding Grades

-Patricia Maslin Ostrowski, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor, Rhode Island College

Paper presented at the 1994 AERA Annual Meeting, New Orleans

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Students at risk of school failure are always a serious concern of educators, yet this problem is especially alarming when the students are only five and six years old. Today, a growing number of children are struggling and unable to succeed in kindergarten and first grade. Rather than retain these young students in the conventional manner, i.e. ask them to repeat a grade, many schools across the country have created a new grade between kindergarten and first grade called transition classes. Now students judged to be lagging behind their classmates according to academic and/or social criteria are frequently encouraged to spend a year in an alternative learning environment: the transition class. At the end of their experience in the transition class, students return to a regular class where, with few exceptions, they remain a year behind their age cohorts.

It is perplexing that schools choose to adopt a policy which appears to be a reformulation of grade retention when it is widely known that research of grade retention condemns the practice (see Holmes, 1989; Jackson, 1975; Shepard & Smith, 1989). Also, transition classes could be considered a form of tracking and presently, educators express serious doubts about the merit of ability grouping (see Oakes, 1985; Slavin & Madden, 1989; Wheelock, 1992). Moreover, the well documented correlation between students who have been retained and dropping out (see Bachman, Green & Wirtanen, 1971; Cervantes, 1965) raises concerns regarding this new breed of retention practice.

This study was designed to explain why and how educators are managing children at risk of failure in the early grades and to inform debate over the merit of extra-year programs. While many practitioners view transition classes favorably and consider them to be different from traditional retention (Maslin Ostrowski, 1988), research to date offers little support for these extra-year classes (Gredler, 1984; Leinhardt, 1980; Maslin Ostrowski, 1992; Shepard & Smith, 1985). This research will document what transpires inside kindergarten, pre-first grade and first grade classes, in order to understand better why so many children cannot meet the demands of the classroom; it will investigate transition classes from the perspectives of practitioners and parents and, finally; it will account for the pronounced discrepancy between research on extra-year programs and its practice in schools today.

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Method of Inquiry

Using the case study method, this qualitative study examines pre-first grade programs in three New England school districts. The three districts are varied in their demographic characteristics, including size, socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic composition, and setting. A description of the districts (using pseudonyms) is provided in Table 1. While diverse in terms of how long they have had the program and what percent of the kindergarten class goes to pre-one, the districts use the same screening instrument for placement purposes (see Table 2).

In each district I conducted in-depth interviews with teachers, support staff and administrators. I interviewed pre-first grade teachers as well as kindergarten, first grade and second grade teachers. With assistance from administrators, I was able to interview parents of pre-one students, past and present, in addition to parents who refused to admit their children into the program. A total of 53 semi-structured interviews were conducted, and ranged in length from one to three hours.

TABLE 1
Community Context of Three Sites

	Primetown	Metrotran	Harborview
SETTING	suburban	urban	quasi-urban
STUDENT POPULATION	2614	20,429	3839
MEDIAN FAMILY INCOME*	$21,539	$14,948	$18,332
%FREE/REDUCED LUNCHES	3	57	20
%WHITE	97	44	96
%BLACK	1	25	1
%HISPANIC	(<1)	20	2
%ASIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER	1	11	(<1)

*State median = $19,448 (RI Department of Economic Development, 1990; RI Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 1992)

I spent a week in each district observing transition classes in order to document what transpires inside them and to establish if there is conformity between what people say is happening in classes with what is actually occurring. During observations I focused on the program setting, program activities and participant behaviors, informal and unplanned activities, and communication patterns. For comparison, I also observed kindergarten, first grade and second grade classes.

Given the importance of using multiple sources when collecting data for case studies (Yin, 1984), documents were gathered and analyzed to confirm or disaffirm what people said in interviews and to supplement evidence gathered during observations. Curriculum guides were the primary documents examined. In addition, documents such as policy statements and literature for parents were reviewed.

TABLE 2
Features of Transition Programs at Three Sites

	Primetown	Metrotran	Harborview
PROGRAM PURPOSE	social	academic & social	social
PROGRAM LONGEVITY IN YEARS	14	7	9
% KINDERGARTEN CLASS IN PRE-1	24	35	13
SCREENING INSTRUMENT	Gesell	Gesell	Gesell

This study provides a comprehensive view of how three districts are using transition programs to manage what they perceive to be a problem of readiness and failure in the early primary grades. Caution must be exercised when generalizing the findings and conclusions of this study, however, some of the central issues raised may be relevant to other districts that assign students to extra-year programs.

Changing Social, Economic & Political Forces Influence Early Primary Curriculum

Schools do not exist in isolation; they must respond to changing social, economic and political forces, and recent changes that have influenced the early primary curriculum are shown by this study not to benefit all children. As the American family reconfigures itself and mothers of young children seek employment outside the home, vast numbers of children are participating in daycare and preschool programs. More children are growing up in poverty which can have a profound impact on a child's readiness to learn. America's business leaders fear we are losing our international competitive edge, and politicians are demanding that schools promote higher academic standards.

Response of Public Schools

These dramatic changes in American society have instigated a national movement to reform education, which includes raising standards for graduation, a greater reliance on standardized tests for promotion decisions and linking teacher and school accountability to test scores. In an effort to adapt to these external forces, many elementary schools have implemented a more

rigid curriculum using methods traditionally reserved for older students.

Parents of pre-one students interviewed for this study are keenly aware of curriculum changes in the early primary program. There are parents in favor of the changes:

> I think children are expected to do a lot at a younger age. As the years go on they keep putting more and more on them. So I think pre-one is great.

Some parents, however, oppose the changes:

> I expected kindergarten to be more casual. What they are doing in kindergarten I expected them to be doing in first grade. And first is really like second grade. I believe they rush the kids too fast today. A lot of parents have said the same thing...They're rushing them to be little adults...I thought back to my childhood...They took it slow with me. I got to be a kid first. I don't think they get to be kids today. Between daycare and nursery school and kindergarten they're practically in school by the time they're born.

Response of Many 5 & 6 Year Olds

Practitioners and parents revealed that many five and six year olds are unable to meet the demands of the current curriculum. These children are apt to experience failure and may be asked to repeat a grade or attend an alternative transition program. When teachers describe children who flounder in their classes they say the students cannot sit still and complete their work, they have short attention spans, they can't work independently and follow directions, and the children have difficulty keeping up with their peers socially. Such characteristics are frequently attributed to developmental youngness, and teachers conclude that the children have been inappropriately placed, or overplaced, in their classes.

Parents, particularly parents of transition grade candidates, are in tune with the stress children may experience when they participate in an inappropriate learning environment. A mother from Harborview observed,

> My son was excited about going to school. Kindergarten at first was play then all of a sudden they got down to work. It went too fast for him. He couldn't get on track. They used to give him a piece of paper and he had to put letters on it...They told him when to start, the lights would be on. When they wanted them done they'd shut the lights off. And he put so much pressure on himself about not being able to finish for them that he started to stutter. Things went downhill from there...That's when they decided to put him in pre-one.

Confident that the stuttering was linked to the kindergarten program she asserted,

> I just wanted him to have what he needed so he would calm down and stop stuttering. The strangest thing was the minute kindergarten was over he didn't stutter anymore. Not once all summer...They tried to blame it on me...that I talk too fast, which I do, but he didn't have this problem until he went to kindergarten.

When children are overplaced, sometimes because there is insufficient room in the transition class or parents refuse to give permission, both teachers and parents report negative repercussions. A superintendent summed up the general reaction of practitioners,

> We see a crisis in children when we recommend pre-one and the parents say no...The child is upset and is not successful in school. It becomes an emotional trauma. The whole family gets upset.

In contrast, some parents who refused to allow their child enter pre-one had a different story to tell. They commented,

> She is doing well in first grade...I know she is going to make it. She is not dumb, she's smart. She catches on quickly.
>
> The teacher says he can't sit still but he is doing the work...I couldn't understand their reasoning for him to go into pre-one. That would have held him back.
>
> I knew she wouldn't have trouble with first grade. Now she is doing excellent in fourth grade. She gets A's. I wish I could tell that lady who tested her.

Although practitioners are aware of the problems of overplacement, no special assistance is provided for students whose parents refuse to admit them to the program. If these children struggle, the school ascribes the problem to a developmental lag that was not treated by the "gift of time," therefore they do not pursue alternative explanations. Yet it is possible that immaturity masks a learning disability or learning style that is incompatible with the dominant teaching method used in the classroom. A delay in identifying such problems means a delay in offering treatment. Still another explanation that schools may be overlooking is that the curriculum and pedagogy are inappropriate, and indeed, the children have no significant learning deficits and are not developmentally slow.

Are 5 Year Olds Ready to Start School?

The issues surrounding school readiness and the best age to begin school are closely connected to transition programs. As

increasing numbers of elementary school children meet with failure, educators debate the question of what constitutes readiness. Some schools have determined that the reason many students are struggling is that they are immature. They believe the immaturity is traced to not being chronologically or developmentally ready for school.

Although children may meet the state's age criterion for entering school, their immaturity is sometimes explained by a birthday that falls late in the calendar year. According to a pre-one teacher from Primetown,

> We've always wanted to have the age of when children enter kindergarten changed. We have seen for years that children are not ready for first grade. The November, December children are young.

A Harborview kindergarten teacher stated,

> Before transition programs came to the district I saw many children who were not ready for my class -- especially the four year olds and children with late birthdays. There are problems with the young children and their youngness explains why the school thinks these children have learning disabilities. The school is asking them to do something that they are not physically and emotionally ready for. I do not think that they are not smart enough. They are just not ready.

Developmental readiness proponents acknowledge that children may be chronologically ready for school but suggest they may not be maturationally or developmentally ready. Advocates of this approach to school readiness, including the three districts involved in this study, often rely on the research of Arnold Gesell and his followers who recommend giving children "a gift of time" if they are not developmentally ready for school (The Gesell Institute of Human Development, 1982). When using this philosophy, children are regularly asked to delay school entry for a year, attend a transition class or be retained in the traditional manner.

Developmental screening and readiness tests are frequently administered to establish if a child is immature. The Gesell School Readiness Screening Test is used by the three districts to ascertain children's developmental ages and to place them in transition programs. The use of such tests for admissions purposes is praised by some and severely criticized by others (see The Gesell Institute, 1987; May & Welch, 1986; Meisels, 1987a, 1987b, & 1989), and is one of the controversial issues related to school readiness.

To cope with the readiness problem and to avoid grade retention in kindergarten or first grade, schools are likely to consider two delay tactics: raise the legal age for school entry

or postpone some children from entering kindergarten for a year. Some parents independently choose academic redshirting, i.e. holding their child out of school for a year in hopes that she or especially he will avoid failure in the early grades. A problem with these strategies is that there will always be a range of maturity levels and chronological ages in classrooms, and more disturbing, some children who most need the support services of public schools will be denied access for a year. Furthermore, recommending or requiring chronologically eligible children to defer entry poses potential legal problems for the district.

If today's kindergarten and first grade curricula are designed for older students than years past, and communities prefer the new curricula, then perhaps the logical and equitable thing to do is raise the legal age for school entry. This would synchronize the curriculum with the children's social-emotional and cognitive levels. Asking children to stay out of public school for another year, however, clashes with the social context of working parents and imposes a burden on low- and middle-income families to subsidize an extra year of preschool and/or childcare. The disadvantages of these strategies help explain why more schools are turning to transition programs to cope with early school failure.

In sum, many schools have decided that the reason children are struggling and failing in the primary grades is that there is something wrong with the students: they are not ready, they are chronologically young or developmentally delayed. The explanation, however, may be more complex and include the influence of changing social forces, as well as issues that are systemic.

School Organization, Retention & Grouping Practices

The organization of elementary schools into distinct grades with a uniform curriculum and standard examinations fosters a preference for a homogeneous teaching environment. This lockstep system of grades found in American public schools stems from the early 1800s when there was a shift from heterogeneous classrooms to a system organized around homogeneous groupings by age. This early reform effort was designed to accommodate larger numbers of students and "to develop a system of instruction which was fiscally, socially and pedagogically efficient," (Labaree, 1984, p.66). Grade retention, ability grouping (tracking) and special education programs emerged to ensure homgeneity. Today, just as generations long ago, when students do not achieve the designated grade level standards they are asked to repeat the grade. Transition classes fit neatly into this lockstep system and have evolved to maintain homogeneity in the early primary grades. They are the new wave of retention practices.

Although grade retention is solidly entrenched in schools, there is no theoretical or empirical support for the practice. Building on Jackson's landmark study (1975), Holmes and Matthews (1984) concluded,

> Those who continue to retain pupils at grade level do so despite cumulative research evidence showing that the potential for negative effects consistently outweighs positive effects. (p. 232)

In a later study, Holmes (1989) found, "On average, retained children are worse off than their promoted counterparts on both personal adjustment and academic outcomes" (p. 27 in Shepard & Smith, 1989).

As mentioned earlier, research shows a positive correlation between retention and dropping out (Bachman, et al, 1971; Cervantes, 1965; Fine, 1986), yet some studies have gone further finding that retention causes dropouts (Hess & Lauber, 1985; Illinois Fair Schools Coalition, 1985; Rice, Toles, Schulz, Harvey & Foster, 1987). Shepard and Smith (1989) conclude that the overage effect of earlier retentions leads to dropping out and that "the apparent relationship between retention and dropping out is not merely a correlational artifact" (p. 58). This research disputes the popular notion that early retentions, e.g. in kindergarten and first grade, are less traumatic and do not have the same negative effects as later retentions.

Putting the issue of cause versus correlation aside, it is clear that a relationship exists between students who are retained and students who drop out of school. Thus the importance of investigating the extra-year transition program magnifies.

The literature specifically addressing transition grades is minimal and mixed, but findings from well designed studies do not generally support placing children in these alternative learning environments rather than promoting them. Few studies focus on the treatment or are randomized studies of the effects of transition programs on student performance and self-esteem. Leinhardt's study (1980), however, did examine the curriculum and found that the real problem may be the classroom not the children, i.e. when the curriculum meets the needs of the students they can be successful. In Gredler's (1984) review of transition grade studies she concluded, "transition room children either do not perform as well or at most are equal in achievement levels to transition room-eligible children placed in regular classrooms" (p. 469).

Shepard (1989) analyzed fifteen additional controlled studies that assess the effects of retentions which occur before first grade, and corroborates Gredler's earlier findings. She points out methodological flaws in the studies, e.g. regarding external and internal validity, and concludes, "children were no better off in first grade (or later) than similarly at-risk children who went directly to first grade" (pp. 67-68). Shepard also states, "Self-concept or attitude measures, only rarely included in research studies, showed no difference or negative effects from the extra-year placements" (p. 76). Given that many

educators and parents promote transition classes on the basis of enhancing children's self-concept and attitude toward school, Shepard's finding is especially noteworthy.

Yet practitioners must view extra-year programs differently or why would they continue to offer them to children perceived unready to be promoted with their peers? The findings of this study may help us to understand better the split between research and practice.

Findings & Discussion

Profile of the Pre-First Grade Curriculum

Applying the standards of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the transition programs observed in the three districts were found to be developmentally appropriate, i.e. they provide a curriculum and pedagogy that honors where a child is physically, emotionally, socially and cognitively (Bredekamp, 1990).

Pre-one classes at the three sites offer enriched learning environments using an integrated curriculum, either through the use of learning centers and/or themes. A teacher from Metrotran who designed an interdisciplinary unit around her class's interest in birds commented,

> The children get motivated when you draw on their interests. It's better when you don't just tell them what to do all the time and, instead, go in a direction that they choose.

Experiential learning is a cornerstone of these classes and as a Harborview teacher remarked, "The death of pre-one would have been a workbook." A Primetown pre-one teacher stressed,

> The curriculum is more than books and covering material according to schedule. It provides a framework of experience and lets the children get into the experiences and use them. It does not force you to rush through the material.

Teachers and other professionals associated with the transition program agree that social development, especially self-esteem, is a distinguishing feature of this curriculum. A reading specialist who assists pre-one students observed,

> There is a great emphasis on having the children feel good about themselves. There is warmth in the classroom. It is not set up for failure. An effort is made to maintain a high level of interest by the children.

Reading and writing are central to the transition program in all three districts. The uniform goal is for students to be

reading or ready to read by the end of the school year. The whole language approach to teaching reading is used in Metrotran's kindergarten and pre-one classes, but in first grade some teachers choose the phonics and basal reading series approach. Thus a portion of students will leave kindergarten and pre-one to encounter a totally different reading method. In Harborview, teachers may decide how they want to teach reading thus both methods were observed, even in the same classroom. First grade teachers, however, are partial to phonics and basals so there is some pressure on the kindergarten and pre-one teachers to rely more on this approach. The Open Court Reading Program, a phonics and basal method, has been adopted by Primetown and is found in all kindergarten and first grade classes. Pre-one teachers, however, prefer literature-based instruction, e.g. they utilize trade books and big books more than basals.

When teachers refer to children being ready (or not) for first grade, what they are really saying is that the children must be able to conform to the first grade curriculum. Given that the major purpose of first grade is to teach reading, this means more specifically that the students must fit the reading program. Not one of the schools included in this study matched reading strategies to learning styles. Teachers or committees decided on a single technique to use with the whole class. Transition teachers are the only exception to this rule; they have the authority to choose what they believe is best for the children and may deviate from the standardized curriculum.

Teachers Afforded More Autonomy in Transition Classes

Every pre-one teacher interviewed stated that a key to the program's success is the flexibility and discretion that teachers may exercise in their classrooms. Teachers in Primetown and Harborview are primarily responsible for developing the curriculum and selecting books and other materials, while in Metrotran the central reading department is responsible for designing curriculum. Yet in each district, teachers report that they are released from the constraints of the first grade curriculum, therefore they are able to focus on individual needs and teach in a way that they believe is best for the children.

Transition room teachers regularly comment how they cherish the freedom to not have to rely on basal readers. A typical comment is,

> There's just no excitement in the basal readers...It would be so terrible to have to teach out of them...to say to the class, now let's turn to page 35 today because yesterday we did page 34...With this kind of curriculum you don't do that...The key to pre-one is probably the teacher. If you put in workbooks it would let anyone do it [teach]. It would be easy to just use them. It would be *easy, easy* for the teacher *but* it would be contrary to the program. I'm glad there are

no pre-one books. I wouldn't buy them if there were.

Pre-one teachers contend that this autonomy helps explain why they enjoy teaching these classes. A teacher from Metrotran said,

> I find it exciting, creative...You don't have to be in this book, on this page with all the kids reading the same thing...we have the freedom to go with the interests of the children...you're not always doing the same thing year after year...I can say one thing this is not boring!

The enthusiasm of the transition grade teachers is transferred to students.

Pre-One Transition Class Size

Many educators believe that certain student-to-teacher ratios are necessary if a teacher is to provide a developmentally appropriate program. For example, the NAEYC (Bredekamp, 1990) states,

> An acceptable adult-child ratio for 4- and 5-year-olds is 2 adults with no more than 20 children...Groups of 5-, 6-, 7-, and 8-year olds are no larger than 25 with 2 adults, one of whom may be a paraprofessional, or no larger than 15 to 18 with one teacher. (pp. 14 & 76)

Student-to-teacher ratios in the three districts vary as follows: Primetown, 15:1; Harborview, 18:1; and Metrotran, 26:1. Primetown and Harborview have kept the student-to-teacher ratio within acceptable limits. With assistance from other professionals, e.g. reading specialists and the early childhood coordinator, along with parent volunteers, the class ratio can temporarily be improved further.

In Metrotran, on the other hand, kindergarten, pre-one and first grade teachers complain that the student-to-teacher ratio of 26:1 is much too large given the special needs of the children. The superintendent contends that the large class size is offset by Chapter 1 teachers who are in the classroom everyday, along with an 11% absence rate and the district's 30-40% mobility rate. Pre-one teachers disagree and feel that the large class size is a problem.

Profile of Kindergarten Curriculum

The kindergarten curriculum used in the three districts incorporates developmentally appropriate practices, but to varying degrees. Both appropriate and inappropriate practices were reported and observed.

Metrotran recently decided that their kindergarten should use the same developmental model as pre-one, and began to abandon

the emphasis on academics. Now the thematic approach is used in all kindergartens, and teachers are urged to develop experiential, hands-on learning activities. Basal readers have been exchanged for trade books.

The same thinking is echoed in Harborview where a movement is underway to transform the kindergarten into a developmentally appropriate program like pre-one. When commenting on this change effort the superintendent said,

> We threw out the basals and tried to make kindergarten developmental...We have people working with the staff to change the mechanics of the classroom...Resistance to change in education is tremendous.

For some parents, however, the change is not fast enough. Consider the statement of a mother whose son went to pre-one:

> I just feel it's too academic...The kindergarten program today is like what we had thirty years ago in first grade. I think that's expecting an awful lot of the children at five years of age. Let's face it some children are not ready yet... I used to remember kindergarten as playing...Now nursery school is like kindergarten and kindergarten is like first grade. Most of the children, I guess, do handle it. I guess it's good they have a program like pre-one because I don't know what Jason would have done. I mean, I guess he would have had to stay back in kindergarten which I don't know if that would have done any good. At least this is an all-day program...gets him used to being in school all day. He learned how to sit still. They don't tolerate that [moving around] in first grade.

Although learning centers are used in Primetown's kindergartens, a principal aptly describes this curriculum as "more academically oriented than developmental." A mother commented,

> I was shocked when I visited a kindergarten and saw what the children were being asked to do. My son likes to work quietly, do dittos and independent work, so we were lucky.

Relationship of Pre-One & Kindergarten

Although many practitioners argue that pre-one is unique, the curriculum and pedagogy used are more like kindergarten than first grade. A principal from Harborview commented,

> They take what they believe is the best of kindergarten, i.e. the structure and change the content. They make the class go at a different pace. They also keep what they see as the best of the kindergarten tradition which is to look at the child

> developmentally. They do not push anything that the child is not ready for...curriculum-wise the goal is set on the first grade. They want to get each child ready so that by September he or she is functioning at the first grade level.

Expressing a different perspective, a principal from Metrotran said, "We made the pre-one a lot like a full-day kindergarten. I think that's what the transition program turned into."

The goal of the three districts' kindergarten and transition programs is identical: to prepare students for the academic and social demands of first grade. Pre-one, however, places greater emphasis on developing the children's self-esteem and confidence. The transition class teacher also has a full day to work with students in contrast to a half day kindergarten program.

Despite overlapping objectives, pre-one teachers report that children will not repeat the previous year's activities because they use different teaching materials. Kindergartners do not take special subjects such as music, art and physical education, while transition class students do. The physical layout of pre-one and kindergarten appear the same. There are small tables rather than rows of desks, and play areas with blocks, art supplies, toys and other manipulatives.

Profile of First Grade

"In first grade we stress academics. There is only a little time to spend in the social areas...," reports a first grade teacher in Primetown. Another teacher captured what first grade looks like in the three districts:

> This begins structured academics...The volume of work is greater in first grade...They use workbooks...the number of papers to complete in one sitting is greater...they don't have as many movement breaks but the few breaks they have all revolve around reading..they're not true breaks.

This profile of first grade was affirmed in interviews with teachers, staff, administrators and parents, as well as during observations across the three sites.

Learning centers and the thematic approach are not used in first grade. Instead of an integrated curriculum and cooperative learning groups, students spend much of their day involved in whole group instruction, with minimal time spent in small groups. Students must work independently and they typically sit and listen to their teachers present lessons rather than learn through discovery.

Parents interviewed consistently described first grade as an academic bootcamp. Typical comments about the curriculum made by parents of pre-one students were:

If your child is not mature enough to sit for two hours...he cannot handle first grade...In first grade if they color out of the lines the child gets a derogatory comment from the teacher.

First grade is push the kids. Quick, quick, quick.

I've got to tell you this and I'm not the only parent to say this but we all think they're rushing them. The school system is rushing them too fast. They taught them one plus one in kindergarten...At that age I was playing with dolls. I don't know what the perfect thing is for these kids...but there is too much pressure on them, they're too strict.

Relationship of Pre-One and First Grade

The differences between first grade and pre-one (or first grade and kindergarten) are dramatic. The contrast between grade levels is vividly demonstrated by juxtaposing teachers' views of curriculum:

First grade teacher from Primetown
We don't get to do many fun time activities. I'd like to see more blocks, sand tables, more play...it would be good for the gross motor skills of the children. I find our program is too rigid, academic. It's great if a child is ready but for those who aren't it's too restrictive. You see only whole group reading in first grade. In the afternoon I can do some groups with children with problems but there's not enough time. This program does not allow you to individualize in the morning. If you walked across the hall to the other first grade classroom you would see the same thing being done at the same time. It's so rigid.

Pre-one teacher from Primetown
You must make sure there is enough time left over to react. It's not enough to just cover the material. You need to sit back and let the children flow with the material and ideas. Let the children take it in.

The curriculum allows children to internalize the material so that it means something to them. It gives students a chance to get into the material, a luxury that isn't there in first grade. They are cranking things out in first grade, constantly pulling at the children.

While the differences are extreme, according to parents and practitioners it is the few shared features which help the transition students to feel as if they have been promoted, not retained. The pre-one programs are a full day, therefore the children eat lunch at school, have recess like the first graders,

and take physical education, music and art classes. All parents and practitioners stressed that the transition class must not be viewed as retention or the positive aspects of the program would be undermined. After all, the transition program was designed to avoid traditional retention.

Another way to think about the relationship among the grade levels is that there is some continuity between the kindergarten curriculum and pre-one, and very little between kindergarten and first grade or pre-one and first grade. A principal from Metrotran commented,

> We created pre-one in a vacuum. There is no continuous progress with first grade. There should be a spiral curriculum and there is not.

The differences in classroom philosophy may help explain why the transition between grades is not always smooth for students. While some practitioners saw the grade change as positive, e.g. one teacher said, "The children who don't fit in first grade are now few and far between. There are programs for them," other teachers made comments such as,

> As the receiving teacher of kindergarten and pre-one children, I find these pre-one children are all over the place. When they come into a room like this they can't sit in a chair and finish a paper without getting up and going to other children -- to help each other with their papers. I think they must be trained this way. It has taken me until December to get these children to sit down. There has to be a happy medium.

Transition Grade Enhances Success of First Grade Curriculum

Most educators interviewed believe that the benefit of pre-one is social-emotional growth rather than academic, but they stated that one of the biggest effects was on the first grade program: pre-one contributes to the success of first grade students. By siphoning the problem students out, the classroom becomes more homogeneous and the teacher can devote her/his attention to the whole group without being distracted by so-called developmentally young children. The teacher then is able to teach the mandated curriculum.

All first grade teachers, even the teachers who had complaints about the transition program, agreed that their classes were better without the pre-one profile child. A typical comment was,

> Children definitely come into first grade at a higher level than when there was no pre-one program. The children who need an extra year are weeded out. The children who are immature tend to have behavior problems and this is eliminated by the program. The children are better able to sit and follow the rules

than if they came straight from kindergarten.

A kindergarten teacher stated,

> It is good for children because the pre-one child would be taking away from the other children who are ready for first grade work. The child who is not socially-emotionally ready for first grade would find a friend like himself and they would pal around and waste time together, not focusing on the teacher and instruction. This is disruptive to other children in the room.

Transition Program Contributes to Homogeneity in First Grade

A majority of teachers interviewed consider the transition program a benefit because it increases homogeneity in their classes and decreases the number of students who use pull-out services. A first grade teacher said,

> Because of the screening for pre-one the children that come to my class directly from kindergarten are pretty good, ready for my class.

A guidance counselor from Primetown observed,

> The first grade teachers could not believe how their classrooms had changed because they had a group of youngsters who were ready to attend. Naturally, they were all around the same level but they could take the transitions, they could take the full day. The kids who wound up in the first grade really got so much more because teachers were there for them. They did not have to bother with kids crying, who just couldn't keep up. And so it had a tremendous effect on the first grade and, of course, the second grade saw it too.

Administrators also report that teachers are pleased with how pre-one effects their classes. One superintendent commented,

> After the program was in place, the grade one teachers were delighted...[Before pre-one] the teachers had to deal with kids who required more attention than the rest of the group. These kids had an attention deficit and could not handle a full day of schoolwork.

It is interesting that practitioners in the three districts are pleased about the homogeneity in their classes, and report that it enables them to teach the first grade curriculum, when research questions the advantages of ability grouping with young children (see Oakes, 1986a, 1986b; Slavin, 1987).

Higher Teacher Expectations

Due to the transition program new norms have been established for the surrounding grades, and first grade teachers

no longer expect to find the pre-one profile child in their classes. Teachers are also now less equipped to handle these children when they do enter their classes. Practitioners count on this program and as one administrator observed,

> The expectations of teachers are now higher. Some of the things you are hearing first, second and third grade teachers say is that they forget when we didn't have anyone on grade level...So when a child can't be on grade level they consider that a problem.

Kindergarten teachers' expectations have also changed in that they no longer feel the pressure of having to get all children ready for first grade and are able to avoid the unpleasant issue of grade retention. A guidance counselor stated that since the inception of the transition program,

> Our people know there are options at the end of the kindergarten year. You don't necessarily have to have the children ready to start first grade because there are some options.

Although the extra-year program is attractive because of the outlet it provides teachers, a kindergarten teacher argues persuasively that it permits the upper grades to dictate curriculum to the kindergartens. In her words,

> We are making excuses for the people who make the curriculum at the high school level. Every year we have to do more and more here based on the expectations at the upper levels. This pushing down of the curriculum makes us change our expectations...Suddenly the children have a program to go to if they don't make it. There are a few kids who can handle the extent of the curriculum while there are other kids who cannot...We have more and more kids who have a problem based on what's expected above.

Thus as pre-one transition programs become ensconced in the school organization, teachers' expectations are apt to be raised which may be problematic for a significant portion of the kindergarten class.

Conclusion

This study provides insights into why so many children are struggling in the early primary grades and concludes that the explanation goes far beyond mere developmental lags. Educators in schools are responding to external forces as they must, however, one unfortunate outcome of a well-intended reform movement has been the development of an early primary curriculum that is inconsistent with the social-emotional and cognitive levels of children. The curriculum has inadvertently been redesigned to defeat young children.

A rigorous curriculum with high standards is a worthwhile goal, but it will never lead to greater achievement if it is at the expense of how children learn best. Practitioners acknowledge that the extra-year program is not a panacea, but consider it a humane response to an otherwise rigid system. Transition classes have been created in an effort to save students from the horrors of grade retention and from inability to cope with the first grade curriculum.

The schism between research and practice is more understandable after speaking to educators. If the extra-year program did not exist, parents and practitioners would demand to know why so many children cannot succeed in kindergarten and first grade. Without transition classes they might insist on answers to questions, such as: What does the school need to do to be ready to teach our children? Is there a better way to organize schools so that children do not have to be labeled, retained and tracked?

Educators also have some degree of research support: they are guided by the Gesell Institute, which advocates a maturational theory of readiness and recommends transition classes, grade retention and academic redshirting. In addition, practitioners are under tremendous external pressure; schools are often blamed for society's ills and the public regularly turns to them to solve its problems. Transition programs are, in part, a deceptively simple response to external forces.

Although the transition programs included in this study do, in fact, provide an enriched, developmentally appropriate learning environment, all transition programs are not as favorable (e.g., see Leinhardt, 1980). Ironically, even these more attractive alternative programs perpetuate an inappropriate curriculum in the surrounding grades. They contribute to the continuation of a curriculum built on homogeneity and a lockstep system of grades.

While there is much to recommend the pre-one programs in these particular districts, and they are unanimously perceived by parents and practitioners to be preferable to traditional grade retention, the expectations are low. Students do <u>not</u> go to second grade; therefore it is a de facto form of retention, as students are only expected to go to first grade the following year. Pre-one tracks children, albeit temporarily, but the cost of this so-called mild form of tracking is an extra year in school. Students will always be a year behind and may suffer the negative effects associated with being overage.

It is possible that the transition year experience is enough to reconcile the imbalance between the required curriculum and the developmental levels of some children. Yet what about those children assigned to pre-first grade who have problems other than or in addition to developmental delays? The pre-one treatment cannot adequately meet their needs which puts them at risk of experiencing multiple retentions, a condition that correlates

with dropping out.

A curriculum designed around Kliebard's metaphors of growth and travel should be the approach used in all early primary classes, not just an isolated pre-one program. It is best that children participate in a well-designed yet flexible curriculum that is a "greenhouse where students will grow and develop to their fullest potential under the care of a wise and patient gardener...a route over which students will travel under the leadership of an experienced guide and companion" (p. 403). A mix of growth and travel metaphors seems to be well suited to the learning needs of young children. Creating this kind of curriculum with child development as the centerpiece will enable schools to break the extra-year cycle.

Too many schools have strayed from what they know about how children learn best. School districts must refocus on child development and learning theory, and reconceptualize the construct of readiness in order to eliminate the need for extra-year programs. School readiness can best be addressed by reframing the issue in terms of how schools can be ready for the children, rather than whether or not children are ready for school, thereby shifting the burden of readiness to schools. Districts need to work with the community to invite all children who are chronologically eligible to come to school on schedule, whatever age the state decides upon, and eliminate academic redshirting. Furthermore, schools must abandon the inappropriate use of testing and assessment for placement purposes, and carefully consider how standardized testing influences curriculum and teaching practices.

Elementary schools will also do a better job if they are structured to be parent and community centered. Extraneous pressures on both schools and families today make it essential that these two groups develop true partnerships so that children have more adults involved with their education, people who are striving toward a shared goal of success for all students. In communities where parents have not had positive relationships with schools, special effort must be made to reach out and include these families. Extra-year programs will have a better chance of being eliminated, if parents and educators in each community develop their own plan to create a school environment and program that builds in success. Along these lines, primary schools can be better connected to the community by designing a meaningful curriculum that creates opportunities for students to participate in the world around them, as well as involving community members in the school program.

As demonstrated in this study, when teachers are permitted to make decisions about the curriculum, they are empowered to do what is best for the children. Teachers, working with parents and administrators will not feel compelled by society to lockstep children into pre-ordained criteria, thereby setting the stage for such experimental failures as the pre-one transition program. This stands in stark contrast to the teachers who felt obligated

to conform to a compulsory curriculum despite concerns that it was not well-suited for all children. Teachers are the heart of this educational enterprise; schools must support them and do whatever it takes to encourage them to assume the role of true professional rather than technician.

The inclusion model, designed to include special needs students in mainstream classes, fits well with this proposed plan to eliminate tracking and retention practices. Both plans applaud the benefits of diversity and work toward creating classrooms that encourage the use of an interdisciplinary curriculum and teaching methods such as cooperative learning groups, while recognizing individual needs. If special education teachers and regular education teachers collaborate in the same classroom, students could receive appropriate instruction without being segregated and teachers would benefit from being less isolated. Some of the money schools save by eliminating the cost of an extra year of schooling could be put toward supporting teachers in this new collaborative venture.

In the latter phases of educational reconfiguration, schools and parents will be more ready to confront structural changes, such as abolishing the lockstep sytem of grades. Even today some alternative schools are successfully creating a non-graded elementary program where students are heterogeneously grouped in multi-age classes. With flexible scheduling, classes work on projects without the constraints of regimented class periods. Some districts do -- and all districts must begin to also consider the option of offering a range of kindergarten programs with different amounts of time spent in school, e.g. half-day, school-day (6 hours) and extended day (8-10 hours); these are options that can address the unique needs of different groups of children.

The findings of this study help parents and educators recognize what research already reveals: that is, extra-year programs are only a quick fix, which enables schools and communities to avoid confronting policies that permit children to be labeled, tracked and retained. A well-designed, developmentally appropriate curriculum will go a long way toward eliminating problems that lead to the perceived need for pre-first grade transition programs, and will allow all children to celebrate both the common ground and richness of diversity in the community, and reach their greatest potential.

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